

AFGHANISTAN: DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

True life accounts of the impact of the UK's development programme in Afghanistan

Photography by Nick Danziger





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TRUE LIFE ACCOUNTS

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The challenge

After decades of turmoil and conflict, Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. For years the people of Afghanistan have been denied basic services that those in the developed world take for granted, like health care and schooling. These stark figures show the extent of the challenge:

- One in four Afghan children dies before their fifth birthday
- More than half of the population are thought to live below \$1 a day
- Around 20-40% of rural Afghans are malnourished

Progress

But there has been real progress since 2001, with life improving for many Afghans:

- 6 million children are now in school, over a third of them girls – a stark contrast to when it was illegal for girls to go to school
- 4.6 million refugees have returned home
- 35,000 children who would have died are alive today thanks to immunisation programmes
- The number of health clinics has increased by 60%. 72 new hospitals and clinics have been built
- The legal economy grew by 14% last year (2005/06)

What is the UK Government doing?

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the part of the UK Government that manages Britain's aid to poor countries and works to get rid of extreme poverty. Since 2001, DFID has spent over £390 million on reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. DFID has committed to spend a further £330 million of a wider UK pledge of £500 million by 2009.

Over the last three years the size of our programme has grown substantially and further increases are planned for the future. Our aid programme to Afghanistan supports three of the Afghan Government's own objectives, as set out in their Interim National Development Strategy:

1. Building effective state institutions
2. Improving economic management, and the effectiveness of aid to Afghanistan
3. Improving the livelihoods of rural people

Building effective State Institutions

Without a functioning and accountable government and effective rule of law, the development of Afghanistan will not be possible. The best way to make a difference is to support Afghans to help themselves – which is why over 70% of our aid goes directly to the Government of Afghanistan. In fact, the UK is the largest donor to the Government's central budget – covering annual costs such as salaries for teachers and health workers. This is exactly what the Afghan Government wants – and is the best chance for building effective state institutions that will last.

DFID support focuses on:

- Supporting the Government of Afghanistan in reforms to improve the quality and efficiency of the civil service
- Training and mentoring staff in key Ministries in central government
- Working alongside the international military to give development advice
- Funding for the the Presidential and Parliamentary elections

Improving economic management and the effectiveness of aid to Afghanistan

Governments around the world pay for services such as health and education by raising money through taxes, customs and other domestic revenues. The Government of Afghanistan is not currently able to raise enough money in this way to pay for its costs. So DFID is working with the Government to help improve revenue collection and financial planning.

- DFID works particularly closely with the Ministry of Finance.
- We are supporting them in customs and tax reform, which will help the Ministry of Finance raise money from imports and exports and wealthier Afghan businesses and individuals to reducing their dependence on foreign aid.
- We are also working with them to improving the national budget process.

Livelihoods

DFID spent £45 million on improving opportunities for Afghan livelihoods last year (2005/06) and we expect to spend a similar amount this year. DFID contributes to a number of non-governmental organisations programmes, including Afghan Aid and the Aga Khan Foundations as well as the Afghan Government's National Priority Programmes for development, which:

- Help local communities identify their own needs, and give them the means to meet them. The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) works by establishing Community Development Councils (CDCs) to decide, on behalf of their village or community, what is most needed in their area. It might be an irrigation project in an agricultural area, a bridge or road if the community is isolated, or a school or health centre. The Councils can then apply for the funding to meet these needs. DFID is providing £17 million over the next three years to support the NSP, which has established over 14,000 CDCs across Afghanistan and funded over 17,000 projects in the areas of agriculture, education, health, irrigation, power supply, transport and water supply.

- Help Afghans set up or expand small businesses. DFID is contributing £20 million over three years to the Government's Micro-Finance Investment Support Facility of Afghanistan (MISFA), which gives small loans of around £100 to people who cannot get credit from banks. Nearly 75% of those receiving loans are women. So far, over £34 million worth of small loans have been given to over 2,000 Afghan families to help shopkeepers, tailors, farmers, builders start to earn a living for themselves.
- Build large-scale public works, such as irrigation schemes and main roads, giving construction jobs to Afghans at the same time. DFID gave £18 million in 2005/06 to the National Rural Access Programme, which has generated over 13 million days of labour. Around 8,000 km of rural roads have been built or repaired, as well as schools, health clinics and water schemes.

The following true life accounts show how the UK government is helping to reduce poverty and rebuild lives in Afghanistan.



FAZELEDDIN



"I used to work on a farm, now I lease 25 jeribs (12 acres) of land and employ my own labourers."

Wartime was not a good time to be a farmer in Afghanistan, as 33 year old Fazeleddin from Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan recalls, "I had twenty sheep and twelve cows on 4 jeribs (2 acres) of land. But I could not keep my animals, the armed groups kept stealing them." To make ends meet, he began labouring in the opium poppy fields.

This part of Badakhshan has grown poppy for many decades. Then in 1993 the British NGO AfghanAid brought beehives to the area. Fazeleddin was one of the lucky few who were given three hives and taught how to manage them over the course of a year. Now he has 33 hives, and is consulted by many other would-be beekeepers in the area. "I even sold a hive for 5,000 Afghanis (£53) to an opium producer recently," he says. "These days he uses his land for wheat and potatoes. Income from poppies is less than before and it requires a huge amount of labour."

In a good year, he reckons that wheat will provide about 10,000 Afghanis (£106) in wheat sales per jerib, compared to 12,000 Afghanis (£127) for opium poppies.

Fazeleddin has no regrets moving to beekeeping. He sells honey locally, and to traders who take it to Kabul. A market appears to have been created, and he is not worried that others are climbing onto the bandwagon. "My life has changed tremendously," he says as he tends his hives on the roof of his house, oblivious to the hundreds of swirling bees: "They don't sting me these days, or maybe I have got used to it!"

I used to work on a farm, now I lease 25 jeribs (12 acres) of land and employ my own labourers. I can afford fertiliser and improved seeds. Before, there was a lot of hard graft and very little money. Beekeeping is not so labour intensive, and my brothers can look after the hives when I am away." Fazeleddin has three children, but his enterprise supports an extended family of eighteen in all.

There are also material comforts. Fazeleddin has added three rooms to his house, has a generator, electric light and a brand new television with two satellite dishes, one for receiving Afghanistan's fledgling private TV channels and the other to receive the rest of the world.

Fazeleddin has now sold a total of 80 hives. And his success is not an exception: AfghanAid say that 80% of their small enterprise grants since 2002 in this region have been repaid. And bees' territorial instincts can come in very handy in this unstable area. During an anti-Western riot in 2005, in the local town of Baharak, the AfghanAid office was saved when the mob disturbed bees in the compound. "They swarmed, and the attackers got scared and ran away," he recalls with a laugh.



ROHGUL WALIDZADA



“People called me dollari and said I should be burned because I wanted a job outside the home.”

For 38 year old Rohgul Walidzada the toughest moment in her fight for women’s rights was in 2000 when she was one of the first four women who dared to walk in the streets of Baharak, a town deep in the valleys of the Hindu Kush in the remote north east of Afghanistan.

Despite wearing the chadri or burka – the all-covering Afghan garment – this brought about huge criticism and insults, which was exacerbated when she dared go to the office of the British NGO Afghan Aid and ask for a job. “People called me dollari and said I should be burned because I wanted a job outside the home,” she recalls. Since then, Rohgul has gone on to be the social organiser for the Aga Khan Foundation and stood for Parliament against Professor Rabbani, the former President of Afghanistan.

She narrowly failed to be elected despite energetic canvassing. “I resigned from my job, hired a vehicle at my own expense and travelled to all the districts in the province. I had no problem with men. They knew me from my work on community development and supported my ideas.” She is adamant that she will stand for Parliament (wolesi jirgah) again in 2009: “Parliament is quite weak, there is no focus on real social issues. As an MP I will try and reduce nepotism and ethnic divisions.”

Like many Afghans, Rohgul has overcome great hardship. A science teacher for 18 years, she is the mother to five daughters and a son who was just 40 days old when they had to flee from Kabul, walking 100 miles then travelling by truck cross the front line to the relative safety of Badakhshan. “We thought we would be killed as we had no permission to escape, but we had to carry on.” They survived the fighting that raged around them and severe illness to make it to Baharak.

Life has improved since then. Both she and her husband Abdul Majid have jobs, their eldest two daughters are at Kabul University studying engineering, the first women students from the province (one coming first in the province’s end of year exams). Tongues continue to wag, “The other day a mullah denounced my husband as a communist and people question my morals because I sometimes stay at the office guesthouse away from my family.” Rohgul has accepted that these taunts are unavoidable if you are pushing social norms in rural Afghanistan. But she detects progress, and found a recent study trip to India revealing, “India had no war, it is a democracy but it is still in the process of development. In rural areas, there are many similarities to Afghanistan.” The implementation of Afghanistan’s flagship rural development initiative, the National Solidarity Programme, is “slow, slow work. Initially we were not accepted in the villages, but now the shura’s (local council) members are taking responsibility for development decisions.” It is, she believes, bringing changes to peoples lives.



KUBRA



Kubra looks far older than her 38 years. Like the other women in her village, her life has been hard and as mother to twelve children – five daughters and seven sons – there has been the added burden and stress of bringing them up during twenty-five years of constant insecurity and the turmoil of war.

“If the NGOs didn’t help us we would die – I mean, now we have a clinic and when we get ill or a pregnant woman needs help when she goes in to labour, we can get help.”

“My brother-in-law killed some Russians, so we often had to move: I lived in five different villages in just seven years. Later, under the Taliban, some of my sons fled to Iran but they had no qualifications so they worked as farm labourers. My husband is a farmer.”

Her four youngest children, two sons and two daughters, are going to school – an opportunity her other children and herself never had. Kubra is the only cash bread-winner for the family. Before, she was earning between 30 and 50 Afghanis a day as a tailor (35p – 60p), but now her salary has increased as she is employed under the National Solidarity Programme as a tailoring teacher for village women. With jobs scarce and her working aged sons unemployed her family depend on her meagre income. The courses, which are held in one of her home’s two rooms, are not only very popular, they are oversubscribed. She has also gained the respect of her students. “This is a time of lots of improvements in my life. When I’m working, I feel very happy. My children are also happy, now

we don’t need help from others. Security is very good, there is electricity and they have brought sewing machines for us – the women want the project to continue.”

The peace dividend is evident in other ways in Kubra’s home village of Kilkizun in northern Afghanistan. “We have a clinic (in Hazrat Sultan), but we have no cars to get there; we cannot find one easily, and it creates big problems for those ladies who are pregnant who cannot walk to the clinic.”

Like many others, Kubra prefers not to think about a return to the anarchy of the past quarter century. “If the NGOs didn’t help us we would die – I mean, now we have a clinic and when we get ill or a pregnant woman needs help when she goes in to labour, we can get help. Before, this wasn’t possible and a lot of people died because of their injuries or other sicknesses.”

In her spare time, Kubra does housework and listens to her radio. Most important for her are the new freedoms in her life and her hope that Afghanistan, “Will be good again like other countries.” She is optimistic because, “Foreigners are helping the Afghan people and the government.” Her requests for additional assistance are modest: the people, she believes, “Need loans for small business like tailoring, sewing – and literacy courses for the tailoring students, as well as a generator for sewing machines.”



MAHMOUD



“Now the children learn from each other as well as me, and they learn better.”

To find a girls’ school in Kasi is in itself a surprise. The village of about 5000 people is 30 minutes from Ghor’s provincial capital Chaghcharan along a rutted track across a hilly desert plateau. The people are very poor, no one has a car and there is no shop. The girls’ school building is small, with fifty girls crammed together squatting on the floor of tiny offices.

The spacious neighbouring boys’ school has been rebuilt recently with new desks donated by United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF). “We would have had no separate girls’ school had we not converted the teachers’ accommodation,” the head teacher Abdul Ahaq, explains.

Also remarkable is the grade 1 class for the youngest girls: 60 of them squatting on a mat outside in the sun, with the teacher using the mud wall of the school to prop up a blackboard. Mahmoud Khan is teaching simple arithmetic, and is doing so in a way that would do credit to imaginative teachers anywhere. He uses dolls – “the students made them as a homework project,” he explains, and displays them to illustrate numbers, subtraction and addition. His young students are absorbed and constantly interacting. He sets them a simple task, which they undertake in groups. They seem to be learning fast.

Despite wearing a suit, Mahmoud looks out of place. He is a wiry, tanned and deeply wrinkled with thin almond-shaped eyes and a wispy beard characteristic of people in central Afghanistan. It turns out he is a farmer, with only six years schooling himself. After long years as a refugee in Iran and Pakistan during the war, he decided to teach because, “I like to serve my people.” His salary of 2,000 Afghanis (£21) a month is not much, but it comes regularly and it helps with the household expenses. At first, the teaching methods were traditional – writing on the board and learning by rote. But then he attended two brief courses on child-centred learning – a total of twenty days – designed by the British NGO Children in Crisis. This transformed his classes. “Now the children learn from each other as well as me, and they learn better.”

Ironically, it is this ex-farmer with no more than primary education who appears to be the best teacher in Kasi – a finding that is no surprise to Children in Crisis who know that untrained teachers are the ones who adopt their methods most enthusiastically.

Here in Kasi, there is a demand for schoolbooks – only one child in three or four is provided with one, and most girls have neither notebooks nor pens and pencils. But curiously in this arch-conservative area the local community also wants girls’ education to be extended to Grade 9. The answer to this surprising break with tradition lies with Mahmoud who believes, like many Afghans, that the lack of education contributed to Afghanistan’s disastrous recent history. “If we had more educated people, we would have fewer problems.”



ISMATULLAH



“I enjoyed learning how to handle suspects best, and how to care for injured or sick people and take them to hospital.”

Ismatullah’s job is hardly exciting by western standards – guarding an ancient monument 12 hours a day seven days a week and spending the rest of the time living in a nearby cave. However, the 23-year-old policeman (he is not sure of his exact age) is happy, “I have a uniform, a steady job, regular pay and I am respected.”

Takht-e-Rustam is one of Afghanistan’s greatest treasures – the 2000-year-old monument in Samangan province is one of the finest examples of Greco-Buddhist architecture in the world, though he cheerfully admits to knowing nothing of its history. “Lots of people come to visit, so there are plenty of people to talk to,” he says contentedly. During his rare time off, he takes his pet cauk (a variety of partridge) to fairs. Cauk fighting is big in northern Afghanistan. Small fortunes are lost and won in the fights, and successful birds are valuable. But Ismatullah seems genuinely fond of his cauk and is reluctant to put it in the ring.

Ismatullah says he has fought too many battles during the long civil war. He was press-ganged by the mujahedin as a 15 year old after being beaten up, “The commanders knew where I lived and came looking for me.” Ismatullah never went to school and his dream of education ended once he was press-ganged, “I never knew the colour of the school gates,” he says.

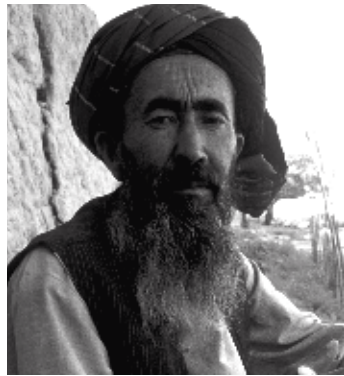
Once the Taliban regime came to an end, the opportunity to be trained as a policeman came. He volunteered and was accepted. The training was conducted by the British in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, fifty miles away. The course lasted four weeks, with a two-week refresher course some months later. “I enjoyed learning how to handle suspects best, and how to care for injured or sick people and take them to hospital.” He also learned how to use a rifle. Ismatullah laughs, “It was chaotic in the war – we just ran and shot wildly at anything that moved. Now I know how to select my target and aim carefully.”

Ismatullah still regrets that he never attended school, “If I could read and write I would be an officer!” By Afghan standards his salary is on par with a civil servant or school teacher, “My monthly salary [3,300 Afghanis (£35)], helps me to support my family, we are six brothers and six sisters.” He says being a policeman is not a social handicap although “people regard me differently when I am wearing the uniform.” It is a lot better than his previous life as a mujahed (holy warrior) or subsequently as a shepherd with a few sheep.

Ultimately, Ismatullah would like to open a shop, in the meantime he seems content with the peace that reigns in the north of Afghanistan. As the local tourists drift away at the end of the day Ismatullah takes his pet Cawk out for a walk in its cage.



JUMA KHAN



"I am an employed person. Everyone respects me now."

The village's new name "Kart-e-Sol" – peaceful quarter, reflects the over-riding preoccupation of most Afghans. Like many settlements near the main road from the Russian border to Kabul, Kart-e-Sol suffered disproportionately during the long years of war and insurrection, the mujahedin would come down from the surrounding hills and attack the government's military posts and the convoys that resupplied them. The town not only lost many of its inhabitants through the war, but many of its buildings were destroyed.

Although the town had once been connected to the limited national grid, this too was destroyed during the war, but now Kart-e-Sol has three hours of electricity each evening, TV and a new access road, but a return to anarchy is still a possibility. "We try not to think about the past but fear is at the back of our minds," says Juma Khan. "We have just rebuilt schools and roads, a return to violence would be heart-breaking."

Juma Khan has more to lose than most: a mild-mannered 55-year-old shepherd with about a hundred sheep, ten goats and a few cows and donkeys, he has spent most of his life with animals and was a logical choice to become the community's basic veterinary worker. The work is largely providing vaccinations against a range of ailments including sheep pox, viral epidemics, animal diarrhoea and anthrax, as well as undertaking castrations and treating parasitic and infectious diseases, some of which had been

endemic. Before taking on this job, he – like his fellow shepherds – had never consulted a vet and he reckoned his animal losses were about half his livestock a year. Over the past three years, this has been reduced to fewer than ten percent. Most members of the local shura (village council) and many of the villagers have directly benefited from Juma Khan's activity, and they agreed that mortality amongst their animals had been drastically reduced.

Juma Khan learned his skills at a four-week course organised under the Afghan Government's National Solidarity Programme and now earns about 2,500 Afghanis (£26) per month from small charges to the farmers whose animals he treats. He reckons about three out of four farmers in his locality use his services. "I am an employed person. Everyone respects me now," he says with some pride. With his extra earning he is able to buy medicines and support his family. He has a son of fifteen in class five, who wants to be a teacher – "The old ways are disappearing and the children have very different aspirations. They don't want to be farmers or shepherds these days," says Juma Khan with a frown.



DAUD YAQUB



Sharply dressed and fast-talking, Daud Yaqub looks and sounds every inch the American lawyer and Washington lobbyist he used to be. He speaks with fluent intensity about the need for security sector reform in Afghanistan which he oversees. On his desk in the Presidential “Arg” Palace in Kabul are Red Cross manuals on international humanitarian law.

“Now the Army is defending our territorial integrity. Before, it was doing police work – domestic security.”

His current headache is getting the ICRC along with NATO, the US and Afghan governments to agree on a process to repatriate Afghan detainees from Guantanamo Bay by next year, not an easy task.

But he is proud of what has been achieved in the past four years: “When the first combat battalion of the Afghan National Army marched in formation into Urgan (a notorious trouble-spot close to Pakistan’s border), the locals were shocked and couldn’t believe this was an Afghan army. They referred to them as ‘Turks with beards’! Now the Army is defending our territorial integrity. Before, it was doing police work – domestic security.”

Daud sees defining clear roles for different agencies and getting agreement on them as a large part of his job. In February 2006, roles were agreed by security, intelligence agencies and line ministries, which he believes will contribute greatly to preventing in-fighting because of

overlapping mandates. But he acknowledges that severe problems of capacity and corruption within ministries remain and that it will take many years to achieve root and branch reform.

He recalls returning to Afghanistan with Hamid Karzai on a British C-130 military transport plane in December 2001, and writing the interim President’s inaugural speech by candlelight on a laptop borrowed from the son of a former president, “while two guys held the printer wires together.” It was an emotional return for the 35 year old, who had been smuggled out of Kabul at the age of eleven disguised as a truck driver’s cleaner (assistant) after his father’s leather business had been expropriated by the pro-Soviet government. He had an American upbringing after that, but a year at the American University of Cairo brought him in touch with his cultural roots and set him on a course of high level lobbying for Afghanistan on Capital Hill, a stint with King Zaher Shah’s office in Rome, and his current key post of Coordinator of the Office of the National Security Council.



MOHAMMED NAIM



"I want to have my own loom and train my own apprentices."

It costs 1,500 Afghanis (£16) for a hand woven turban in the market. "For the time being, they have to be imported from Herat and Mazar. Wouldn't it be better if we made them ourselves?" asks Mohammed Naim, an 18 year old apprentice weaver. Naim is a trained tailor, but enjoys the new challenge of silk weaving, "Because it is a rare skill."

Silk weaving was one of the many traditions in Badakhshan but, like others, it was lost during the war years. The seven other apprentices will soon be joined by a further seven trainees who were also recruited through the local community development council set up through the government's National Solidarity Programme.

The initial process of separating thread from the silk cocoon is not the most appealing of work. An apprentice, Shamsuddin, and his tutor squat under a bare light bulb in a dingy room for hours on end over a boiling vat of water filled with hundreds of cocoons. Every couple of minutes one of them snatches a handful of stray threads to secure them to a spindle; for the novice such as Shamsuddin scalding your hands is a real risk.

He did not have a lot of competition to get the job: "Two boys were too young, one was deaf and the fourth left when he saw the work," he explains. His trainer, Mohammed Aref, is one of a team of six from the western city of Herat where hand-woven silk is still much in demand. His colleagues train eight apprentices from

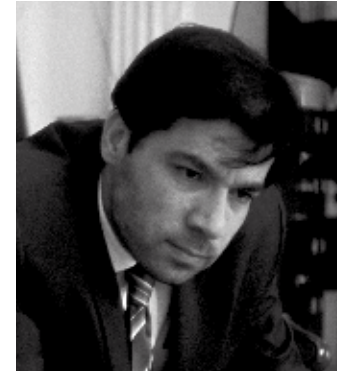
Jurm in the remote poppy-producing centre of the north eastern province of Badakhshan. Numerous skills need to be learnt from separating the threads from the cocoons, to joining it together in various strengths of strands, to finally weaving it into turbans, shawls and handkerchiefs for the local market.

The training centre has an impressive display of varied home-made looms and spindles, the product of generations of know-how from the Herat based trainers who were brought by the Aga Khan Foundation to Jurm for six months to kick-start the reintroduction of the silk industry to Badakhshan. Naim is ambitious, "I want to have my own loom and train my own apprentices," he says. With fourteen siblings, he has a large family to support.

"Naim learns quickly, he is a good student," says his trainer full of praise. But the real test will be marketing. This may be helped by the legacy of the illicit opium industry it is intended to replace. Jurm is awash in cash and the expensive silk shawls and turbans, which are a sign of status and wealth, are much sought after for those who can afford them. Wahiullah, another apprentice who has returned from many years labouring in Iran, is philosophical about a silk-weaving cottage industry, "We will see how this works and whether we can find a market. If not, I will try something else."



JAWED LUDIN



"It took me two hours to introduce my successor to 60 members of staff in the Director of Communications Office."

Jawed Ludin, now President Hamid Karzai's Chief of Staff, remembers his first day as Presidential spokesman in May 2003, "After being introduced to the President I asked to meet my colleagues and see my office. They took me to a prefab which was locked – there was no-one there and they had lost the key. The next day, they broke the lock and I entered the office which was the size of a 20-foot truck container. There was a filthy desk, chair, sofa and large TV, as well as a new computer. It had been there for a year and was still in its box."

Not one of his 17 staff was computer literate, in fact many were "phantom" staff, existing on paper only. "The only stories that come out of the Presidential Palace were clichéd accounts of whom the President met, when the meeting took place, and that they discussed matters of "mutual interest". On his departure two years later, Ludin says, "It took me two hours to introduce my successor to the 60 members of staff in four departments of the Director of Communications Office, almost all of whom were computer literate with their own terminals. An independent analysis showed the Palace had the highest number of quotes printed and broadcast of any department in the government. Our Press Officers are highly professional – the best in the government."

Ludin was 30 years old in 2003 when he returned to Afghanistan with a Masters in politics and sociology from London University after 11 years in Pakistan and the UK as a refugee. His escape to Pakistan in 1992 along with his nine siblings and parents was dramatic. After three months of "hell" sheltering in the basement of their Kabul home from the intense bombardment from factional fighting all around, the family fled with their neighbours in a hired bus, leaving all their possessions behind. "I left all my books neatly packed up. I was 19 years old and a medical student. I thought I would be back in a month once the fighting was over, but I have never been back to my home. Everything was totally destroyed."

The Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in 2001 brought him into contact with many senior Afghans who later became ministers. He got married to an Afghan in Canada, but was head-hunted and returned, "with hope, enthusiasm and a lot of energy" to his formidable task as presidential spokesman. He glosses over his own abilities and feels the credit should go to DFID for supporting the transformation of the office with a £1.5 million grant. "This is an example of how change can take place in an environment of bad working habits. The key was that DFID spotted where the capacity was for change and invested in it. I would certainly have failed had they not been so forthcoming."



HAYATULLAH



“I provide what my customers need and I know what other shops charge, so I try and charge a few Afghanis less.”

“I am sorry I’m late,” says Hayatullah apologetically, “I was trying to sort out a row between two neighbours. Their sons were fighting.” Violence is something Hayatullah is used to. His first shop was destroyed in 1983 during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Here, in Khairabad in Badakhshan, as in many parts of Afghanistan at the time, the government controlled the village by day, the mujahedin (holy warriors) by night. Having lost everything, Hayatullah had to labour in the fields.

Several years later, he moved 200 kilometers west to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif where he was promptly conscripted into the army. After two years’ service, he opened a shop and built up the business with loans from neighbours and friends. But the Taliban take-over of Mazar in 1998 saw the end to that enterprise, “It was chaos and anarchy, and my shop was looted,” he recalls. He moved back to Badakhshan and again worked as a labourer in the poppy fields. “It was very hard work from dawn to dusk each day and I was paid a maximum of 150 Afghanis (£1.60) per day. My health suffered.”

Three years ago, in 2003, Hayatullah’s luck changed. He was successful in applying for a micro-credit of 10,000 Afghanis (£106) which allowed him to open another shop. He met the criteria for the loan: skills and experience in the trade, access to a market and the needs of the community, in return, “I promised I would not work in the poppy fields again.” Business was slow at first, but continues to grow steadily. Hayatullah sells a wide variety of goods from rice, tea, oil, biscuits and salt to notebooks and pens and has the Afghan shopkeeper’s talent for displaying all his wares. Although he has many competitors, Hayatullah is willing to share his recipe for success, “I provide what my customers need and I know what other shops charge, so I try and charge a few Afghanis less.” Now he reckons he makes 5,000 Afghanis (£53) per month and his 18-year-old daughter, who has benefited from training as a tailor, brings in another 1,000 Afghanis (£10.60). He paid back his loan in four instalments over two years.

Hayatullah’s life is better than it has been for nearly 30 years, “It is a huge difference from before: Then it was a hand-to-mouth existence. Now I can support my family, my children go to school, I can take them to the doctor and buy medicines. Without the loan, I would be waiting to die. Unemployment is a big problem here, and some families of ten or twelve have only one breadwinner.”



AQILAH JAN



“The country’s bright future depends on education, that’s why they are targeting it. People need to realise that if you burn schools, you are burning your own future.”

Dr Aqilah Jan has always been a woman of independent spirit, even under the Taliban. “I have worked here for five years, and I was the first woman to go to remote villages to tend to patients. The Taliban did not interfere with healthworkers.”

Since then, Aqilah has moved from health to local politics and is chair of the Community Development Council (CDC) in Chaghcharan, as well as a member of the Ghor Provincial Council. Strikingly handsome at 37, she is married to an assistant doctor, Maroof Khan, and has four young children.

In the three years since the CDCs started under Afghanistan’s rural development initiative, the National Solidarity Programme, she believes there have been many changes for women. “They were not allowed outside the home, the girls were not allowed to go to school, and women did not participate in decision making. Now there is better security, many girls are encouraged to go to school, and five women are in the CDC and four in the Provincial Council (both have 15 members).” Amongst improvements she lists the digging of four fresh water wells and providing electricity for 110 homes. She is particularly proud of a daily literacy course in the local mosque for forty women, and has plans to recruit a second teacher to fulfil increasing demand.

Some members of the community objected that Aqilah was chair of the CDC, but she says that both men and women elected her, and she has the full support of her husband. “I feel proud

and respect her for this. We had a good life in Herat (Afghanistan’s second largest city),” Maroof explains, “but then we came here after relatives asked us to help the community.” This was at a time of devastating drought and insecurity. The main neo-Taliban activity now is further south, but recently several schoolrooms were destroyed less than 50 kilometers away. “We (the Provincial Council) had a meeting several days ago to discuss this, and we recommended that people should denounce and not protect those who are responsible,” Aqilah says, “The country’s bright future depends on education, that’s why they are targeting it. People need to realise that if you burn schools, you are burning your own future.”

Aqilah is grateful for the help of the international community in contributing to the country’s development. “Afghanistan has been suffering for over 25 years. There have been many calamities and the needs are great.” She is hopeful that the country’s embryonic democracy can take hold, “It’s new, progress is slow, but as time passes it will be more successful. The biggest obstacle is the interference of other countries. If there is no security, then people are running for their lives instead of building their homes.”

Aqilah has her own plans for the future: to run for election to the national parliament (the Wolesi Jirgah) in Kabul in four years’ time. Maroof Khan declares, “I will support her, even if she wants to go abroad,” – an unusual step for an Afghan husband.



DOCTORS AKBAR AND HAMID



“Before, doctors were on duty only on paper.”

Dr Akbar’s woebegone expression said it all. “Here, there is nothing to do and nothing to see, I have no friends, there is no telephone, no library, no training, no TV. I have a radio but it broke – I took it to the bazaar but no-one can repair it! I am so ashamed of being here, I told my family I am working in Herat (Afghanistan’s second largest city).”

“Here” is Chaghcharan, capital of Ghor, a vast and remote province of high plateaux and mountains which is home to about 650,000 people. The capital – like the province – has no paved roads and only a few vehicles. But Dr Akbar is in some ways very fortunate. The Chaghcharan hospital is one of only five in Afghanistan where doctors are paid a PRR (priority reform and restructuring) premium – in his case about 20,000 Afghanis (£212) a month, which is ten times more than young Afghan doctors will generally earn. This includes a 50% bonus for working in a remote location.

Not all doctors agree with Dr Akbar: Dr Hamid Arianpour, from Taywara in the south of the province, is pleased with the extra pay and the promise that it will transform hospital services, with a twenty-four hour duty roster for medical staff. “Before, doctors were on duty only on paper.” says Dr Hamid, who also welcomes the major change in charging policy – as from April 2006, all services, including medicines, will be given free to patients. Doctors say they see 150 patients a day, but the hospital seems quiet by western standards.

A particular challenge is persuading women to seek pre-natal advice and have their babies delivered in the hospital. At present, nine out of ten Afghan women in the provinces do not, resulting in infant and child mortality rates of over 20% and one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. In Chaghcharan, only one or two deliveries are carried out per day – Dr Hamid reckons that it should be 10. But three years ago, only one or two women a month came to the hospital. Distance, the lack of roads and travelling costs from remote areas is a major problem. Another is the need for a woman gynaecologist, but even a PRR-enhanced salary of 60,000 Afghanis (£640) a month (huge by Afghan standards) has yet to attract a candidate to this remote spot.

For the time being, the team of seven midwives has to cope. Karishma Jan reckons she sees ten to fifteen patients a day, with half of them wanting family planning, which is provided free – oral contraceptives, are most popular, she says. There is a steady increase in demand for contraception. She has also benefited from PRR, and now takes home 19,000 Afghanis (£202) a month. She says she will now stay in the job longer. There are no plans for outreach activities, but the hospital does plan to use the local radio to publicise its new free services. The hope is that this ‘pull factor’ will increase patient numbers and begin to improve Afghanistan’s appalling health statistics. And Dr Akbar will be much busier and less bored – which is probably at the root of his current unhappiness.



THE KHALILI FAMILY



"I became a teacher at the school, and in fact I was teaching the children of those who had previously criticised us!"

Early in 2002, Sangin and Rahmia Khalili and their five children sparked a minor social revolution in Daulatyar, one of the remotest districts of Afghanistan's poorest province, Ghor. Sangin, who had fled Kabul with his family to escape the Taliban, remembers: "After the fall of the Taliban, there were no girls' schools, so I sent my three daughters to the boys' school." Their daughters – Leedni (16), Afghani (14) and Nagina (13). They were teased and insulted with "bad talk": "They're from Kabul" and "They're communists."

Their neighbours said their daughters ought to be kept at home to do the household chores rather than go to school. But over the next two years, other parents followed their example and a girls' school was set up. Rahima laughs: "I became a teacher at the school, and in fact I was teaching the children of those who had previously criticised us!"

The family insist that a radio soap opera broadcast by the BBC, *New Home New Life*, influenced their decision to educate the girls. "The drama also gave me the idea to suggest that Rahima should work as a teacher," Sangin claims. "She is an educated woman and it seemed good sense we should have two incomes rather than one." *New Home New Life* went on the air in 1994 three times a week in Dari and Pashto with carefully researched storylines which focused on the needs and concerns of listeners.

It always had a strong women's agenda, with the heroine healthworker Gulalai seen as a role model by the many female listeners. Reportedly the Taliban, who famously strung TV sets and music cassettes from lampposts, considered banning radio as well. But they reckoned it couldn't be enforced, and besides many were addicted to *New Home New Life* despite its reformist tone. And they depended on the BBC news.

These days, the BBC's near monopoly has been broken. The darkening room is flooded with light as the local generator kicks in. Ramina utters a silent prayer "whenever we see light we pray that God will bring light into our lives," she explains. But electricity brings more than light. The Khalili girls begin to fidget, they look at the other room, and one by one, they quietly slip away. TV culture has reached even remote Ghor province.

Like most of Afghanistan, the Khalili girls are hooked on "Tulsie" an Indian soap opera dubbed into Dari and broadcast three times a day. Sangin admits he and the family listen to *New Home New Life* less often these days. "There are more radio channels and now TV, so we can choose which gives us the best news and entertainment." But he seems genuinely grateful for the BBC radio soap opera during the family's difficult years as a displaced family – internal refugees. Like many other Afghans, it seems the Khalilis' confidence in pushing social norms was assisted by a popular BBC drama conveying and popularising the same issues. Even now, five years later, there are a number of schools in Ghor which are co-educational by default because of the increasing demand for girls' education and the lack of girls' schools.



MALALAI



"I can speak with people from all walks of life, about what they feel and think. It has made me strong, I know about people's difficulties and problems and sometimes I can help solve them."

Malalai does not pass unnoticed in the streets of Kabul, dressed in blue jeans and a white embroidered scarf she is a journalist with a mission. Her weapon is her tape recorder and her mission is to give a voice to some of Kabul's young people who face a difficult and uncertain future. Her confidence is borne of a hardscrabble existence and the horrors of a war that came to her doorstep and continue to haunt her.

"We only left the capital for two months when our street became the frontline between two warring factions. We were the only ones left and eventually we too fled, we were warned that they would come and kill my Father because he had been a police officer during Najibullah's government. We had to sell all our possessions and my Mother's jewellery. We went to hide in a safe house in the provinces but even there we weren't safe so we returned to Kabul – where we couldn't walk the streets it was so dangerous. A mother wanted to rescue her injured son who had been shot, he fell in front of our door, we also couldn't rescue him because of the intense shooting. Our Mother hid us because the dogs came to eat him and the next day only his shoes were left."

Malalai's father died of a heart attack during the Taliban regime, "It was 3:30am, we were sleeping in another room, Mum came to get us, we started crying, he wanted to talk but he couldn't. I think my Father was burdened by all our problems, he never wanted to share them, he tried to protect us and pretend he was happy."

Malalai is passionate about journalism and the new freedoms. She is the editor of a weekly programme in Dari and Pashto called Straight Talk which focuses on issues of interest to Afghan teenagers. The programme has a loyal following with many listeners phoning in comments. An item on whether or not there should be police women in Afghanistan received more than 400 calls.

"Suicide bomb attacks are on the increase in all parts of Afghanistan. Now the Taliban are fighting, they don't want democracy, they don't want girls to go to school. Everyone wants power, this is the main problem here. I can speak with people from all walks of life, about what they feel and think. It has made me strong, I know about people's difficulties and problems and sometimes I can help solve them."

"If I hadn't got this job, I might have had to stay at home or search for work, but there are so few jobs." Malalai is the only one of four siblings who has found a job and she supports them and her mother, "I give all my wages to my Mother, and she gives me 20 Afghanis (21p) per day pocket money. My aim is to better my life and rescue my family from problems. I think people who work should share more, be more equal."

In the meantime she is grateful that she can broadcast sensitive subjects uncensored - which wasn't possible not so long ago.

Malalai works for Media Support Partnership's Straight Talk, a weekly radio programme for Afghan teenagers funded by the UK's Global Conflict Prevention Pool.

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DFID's headquarters are located at the addresses below:

DFID London:
1 Palace Street
London SW1E 5HE
UK

DFID Glasgow:
Abercrombie House
Eaglesham Road
East Kilbride
Glasgow G75 8EA
UK

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7023 0000

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7023 0016

Website: www.dfid.gov.uk

E-mail: enquiry@dfid.gov.uk

Public Enquiry Point:
0845 300 4100 or +44 1355 84 3132 (if you are calling from abroad)

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